

**09/28/25 The Supremacy of Love
1 Corinthians 13:1-3**

First Corinthians is the great love chapter of the Bible. The love that is described in this chapter is agape love, the highest type of love there is. It is not so much an emotional love as it is a volitional love. It is the kind of love that chooses to do what is best for another and not what is best for one's self. This is the "more excellent" (12:31) way to operate a church. This is the most superior and highest level that any church or individual can reach in the mind of God.

Let's read 1 Corinthians 12:31-13:3...

"Have you ever noticed that it's possible to do the right thing in the wrong way—and end up with nothing?" "It's like baking a cake without sugar or any sweetener..." Imagine baking a cake but forgetting the sugar. You might have all the right ingredients - flour, eggs, butter - but without the sweetness, the cake is flat and unappealing. That's exactly what Paul is saying in 1 Corinthians 13:1-3. You can have all the gifts, all the knowledge, even make great sacrifices, but without love, it all amounts to nothing. Love is the essential ingredient of the Christian life.

Main point: 1 Corinthians 13:1-3 gives three examples of how ministry without love is meaningless in God's eyes.

Love Surpasses Language in verse 1

Love Surpasses Learning in verse 2

Love Surpasses Labor in verse 3

My prayer is that we each grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Jesus and we share the love He has poured out in our hearts.

I. Love Surpasses Language

We are going to begin by first looking at 12:31...

When Paul says: "But earnestly desire the best gifts," he is speaking to the Corinthians as a local church, not as individuals. We know this because the verb is plural in the original text. He is saying that as an assembly they should desire to have in their midst a good selection of gifts that edify. The best gifts are those that are most useful rather than those that are spectacular. All gifts are given by the Holy Spirit and none should be despised. Yet the fact is that some are of greater benefit to the body than others.

For example, 1 Corinthians 14:1 says, "Pursue love, yet desire earnestly spiritual gifts, but especially that you may prophesy."

We should eagerly desire spiritual gifts that will directly contribute to the spiritual growth and development of the whole church. The Corinthians were focused on the gift of tongues, but without the gift of interpretation, that gift would not benefit anyone. The "greater gifts" in 12:31 refer to those like prophecy and teaching that benefit the whole church community.

While every believer cannot possess the greater gifts, they can possess and practice something far greater than these greater gifts and that is agape love that Paul will explain in chapter 13. We will see how love is the "more excellent way" by which spiritual gifts must operate.

Look with me at 13:1...

The five “ifs” that we find in verses 1-3 are each third-class conditional sentences, which describe potential actions. Paul uses deliberate hyperbole, pushing his examples to the extreme. Hyperbole is the literary device of using extreme, obvious exaggeration to emphasize a point or evoke a strong feeling, and it is not meant to be taken literally.

For example, saying “I’m so hungry I could eat a cow” is a hyperbole to emphasize great hunger, not to suggest I literally could eat an entire cow.

In our text today, the apostle Paul uses hyperbole when he essentially says, “Even if I had all the spiritual gifts and could reach the highest heights of ability or experience, without love I would be nothing.” By shifting to the first person, Paul makes it clear that this truth applies to himself just as much as to the Corinthians.

He begins with the idea of language when he says “the tongues of men and of angels.” The Greek word *glōssa* can mean the physical organ of speech, but more often it refers to language, as in one’s “mother tongue.” Thus, “languages” may be a clearer rendering than “tongues.”

Paul is not advocating or promoting angelic languages, but simply postulating, if that “higher” supernatural language were even possible for finite natural men, it would still be worthless without love! That’s his main point. He is not saying it is possible for men to speak angelic languages. It is not even logical. Scripture gives no evidence of a special angelic dialect; when angels speak to people, they always use human language

Paul’s point is that even if he could speak every human language with perfect fluency, or even with angelic eloquence, without love his words would amount to nothing more than empty noise—like a gong or a cymbal.

Paul says that even the most exalted form of speech is worthless without love. The greatest truths, spoken in the most brilliant way, lose their value if not spoken in love.

The Corinthians especially needed this reminder. They exalted the gift of tongues and took pride in it, but because they misused it for selfish ends, it lacked the Spirit’s fruit. The fruit of the Spirit begins with love, then joy, then peace. Without love, what the Corinthians considered a spiritual triumph was actually spiritual failure.

In English, we use the word “love” very broadly—so broadly that it can lose depth. I can say, “I love the central coast, I love pizza, and I love my wife” – but hopefully there is a different type of love for each.

The koine Greek had different words for love. Eros is a sensual love, *phileo* is a brotherly love, *storge* is a familial love. But the Greek word *agapē*, carries a specific, richer meaning.

Agapē love is unconditional, self-giving, and enduring love, reflecting God’s very nature.

Worldly love says, “I love you because...” (based on attraction, benefit, or worthiness). But *agapē* loves regardless of response or merit. Romans 5:8 says, “But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.”

The application for us is that we are called to love even when others don’t deserve it.

Worldly love is driven by emotion and feelings; we “fall in” or “fall out” of love. But *agapē* love is rooted in the will—choosing to seek another’s good. The application is that true love is not a mood but a commitment.

Worldly love is focused on what I gain (pleasure, comfort, fulfillment). But *agapē* love is willing to sacrifice for others' good. Jesus said in John 15:13, "Greater love has no one than this, that one lay down his life for his friends."

We should not ask "What do I get?" but "What can I give?"

Worldly love is reserved for those we like, admire, or benefit from. But *agapē* Love: Extends even to enemies and the unlovable. Jesus said in Matthew 5:44, "But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you." God's love challenges us to cross boundaries and love all people- even those who feel like enemies.

Worldly love can fade when circumstances change. But here in 1 Corinthians 13:7–8 we see that *agapē* love "Bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never fails."

Agape love remains constant even in trials. *Agapē* love is not natural to us—it is supernatural, it is the very love of Christ in us. We receive this love from Jesus, we then we reflect it to others.

Do you know this love? Have you experienced the love of Christ? Do you see yourself as a sinner in need of a Savior?

Jesus said in John 15:9, "Just as the Father has loved Me, I also have loved you; abide in My love."

Jesus modeled agape love in washing His disciples' feet and commanded it as the mark of true discipleship in John 13:34–35 (the verses that Steve read at the beginning of the service), "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another."

Love—*agapē* love, self-giving love, sacrificial love—is the supreme mark of a disciple of Jesus Christ. He taught it, and then He showed it—when He stooped low, took up the towel, and washed His disciples' feet. Ultimately Jesus demonstrated agape love when He willingly and sacrificially laid down His love on the cross for you and me so that through His blood shed for your sin and mine we would find forgiveness, cleansing and reconciliation to God.

And what we will see in weeks ahead is that Paul's portrait of *agapē* love in 1 Corinthians chapter 13 is a portrait of Christ Himself. This love is not natural—it is the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22).

In your own flesh, in your own will you have no power to love this way. This love doesn't originate from you within you or within me. 1 John 4:19 says, "We love because God first loved us." Paul answers in 2 Corinthians 5:14, "For Christ's love compels us, because we are convinced that One died for all, and therefore all died. And Christ died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for Him who died for them and was raised again."

So, we can love God's way if we have a living relationship with Christ and He is alive each day in our hearts. His love controls, compels, guides and motivates us. Paul said in Galatians 2:20...

You must have a vertical living day by day love with our risen Savior so that there can be a horizontal love with one another.

Behind every sin is lovelessness. And behind every act of true obedience is love.

That's why Paul says in 1 Corinthians 16:14, "Let all that you do be done in love." Not some things. Not most things. All things.

Our motive is what drives what we say and do. A motive is the "why" behind the "what." If our motive is self-interest—praise, promotion, or advantage—our ministry will not be pleasing to God, no matter how theologically correct our words or helpful our service appear. Without love, in God's sight, we are only making noise like a noisy gong or clanging cymbal.

In Corinth, the people were used to hearing religious noise. The city was filled with temples to pagan gods—there was Cybele (mother goddess, often called the "Great Mother"), Bacchus and Dionysus were considered the gods of gods of ecstasy and revelry. The worship ceremonies of these pagan gods often featured frenzied sounds: the banging of gongs, the crashing of cymbals, loud shouting, and ecstatic music. It was meant to stir emotions and whip the worshippers into a frenzy. But in the end, it was just noise. No real transformation. No lasting power. No true god behind it.

So, when Paul writes in verse 1 to the Corinthians, "If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but do not have love, I have become a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal" - he was drawing on an image they knew well. He was saying, "Without love, even the most dazzling spiritual gift sounds just like those empty pagan rituals you've seen all your life. Loud, but hollow. Impressive, but meaningless."

Think of a child banging on pots and pans in the kitchen. The noise fills the house, but it isn't music—it's chaos. Without love, that's what our service, our prayers, even our preaching becomes: loud, but without meaning.

By contrast, as born-again Christians, when our words and actions are filled with love, they're not noise - they're a melody. Love takes what would otherwise be empty performance and turns it into true worship, pleasing to God and edifying to people.

The question for you is this: What sound does my life make?

Do your words to your family sound like love, or just like noise?

Do your acts of service to others flow from love for God and others, or from pride and self-promotion?

Do your prayers rise with love, or do they clang like empty cymbals?

Love is what turns noise into melody. Love is what makes our gifts useful, our service fruitful, and our witness powerful.

The good news is we are capable of loving in a Christlike way. How? Paul prayed in Ephesians 3:18-19, I pray that you "may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled up to all the fullness of God."

We can love God's way if Christ is alive each day in our hearts. His love controls, compels, guides and motivates us.

As believers we can love because Romans 5:5 tells us, "The love of God has been poured out in our hearts through the Holy Spirit who was given to us." We don't have to manufacture love. We don't have to strive to produce it. God has already poured it out. All we have to do is share what He has given.

Paul says we don't even need to be taught by man how to love, because 1 Thessalonians 4:9 says we are "taught by God to love one another." Scripture urges us again and again:

Pursue love (1 Corinthians 14:1).
Put on love (Colossians 3:14).
Increase and abound in love (Philippians 1:9).
Be sincere in love (2 Corinthians 8:8).
Be united in love (Philippians 2:2).
Be fervent in love (1 Peter 4:8).
And stir one another up to love (Hebrews 10:24).

Brothers and sisters, love is not optional. Love is not secondary. Love is not extra credit. Love is the very essence of the Christian life.

Love surpasses language.

II. Love Surpasses Learning

Verse 2...

The list of spiritual gifts and supernatural abilities in this verse is very impressive and if you had these gifts, certainly you would be something very special in the sight of people. The first three spiritual gifts pertain to knowing and communicating God's Word. The last gift pertains to believing God's Word. The impossibility factor is the word "all." No man, not even an apostle, had an "all" ability level.

First verse 2 says "If I have the gift of prophecy." The gift of prophecy was the number two ranked spiritual gift in Paul's list in 12:28. It was a supernatural ability to receive and communicate direct revelation and messages from God.

At the start of chapter 14, Paul calls prophecy the greatest of the spiritual gifts, because the prophet proclaims God's truth so that people may know and understand it (14:1–5). Paul himself was a prophet (Acts 13:1) and held the office and gift of prophecy in the highest esteem. Yet, even as he extols its greatness, he insists that prophecy- like every other gift - must be exercised in love.

Paul says in verse 2 just as prophecy without love is nothing, so is the understanding of all mysteries and all knowledge. Paul imagines ultimate human understanding: knowing all divine secrets and all human facts. Even that, he says, would count for nothing without love.

And knowledge without love is worse than ignorance—it breeds pride, arrogance, and conceit. Knowledge is good, beautiful, and fruitful when held in humility and ministered in love. But without love, it becomes Pharisaic and ugly. As Paul writes 1 Corinthians 8:1, "Knowledge makes arrogant, but love edifies."

Paul valued knowledge deeply. He prayed in Philippians 1:9 "that your love may abound still more and more in real knowledge and all discernment." But he knew that only love turns knowledge into edification. We can know and not obey. We can know and not be strengthened. Love is the divine edifier.

Notice again verse 2...

No one preached saving faith more strongly than Paul. But here he is speaking of faith for mighty works - the gift of faith that can "remove mountains."

Paul seems to be alluding to the saying of Jesus in Matthew 17:20 that tells us that after His disciples had failed to heal a boy who was demon-possessed, they asked Jesus why they had failed. He answered with these words:

And He said to them, “Because of the littleness of your faith; for truly I say to you, if you have faith as a mustard seed, you shall say to this mountain, ‘Move from here to there,’ and it shall move; and nothing shall be impossible to you.”

Jesus was using the same kind of literary technique that Paul is using in this passage. It is the technique of hyperbole. It is the technique of exaggerating to make a point.

Jonah is an example. He had great faith in the power of God’s Word; he fled from preaching to Nineveh not for fear of failure but for fear of success. He knew God was gracious and would forgive the Ninevites, and he did not want that. When God spared the city, Jonah prayed one of the most loveless prayers in Scripture in Jonah 4:1-3: “Please Lord ... take my life from me, for death is better to me than life.” Jonah’s preaching brought a great miracle of repentance, but the preacher himself was a nothing because he did not love.

Notice again in verse 2...

If these works are done without the kind of agape love that Jesus has for us, then it’s not just that those works are nothing. No! Paul says that we ourselves are nothing!

James Merrit writes, “You may have a PhD in theology - perhaps even more degrees than a thermometer—and display great insight into deep truths that no one else can even fathom, yet without love it is not just that your scholarship is nothing. Tragically, you yourself are nothing. In other words, you may have knowledge bursting from your head, but if you do not have love bursting from your heart, you are nothing.”

Daniel Akin writes, “Consider the Pharisees, they were brilliant theologians. They knew the law and the Scriptures inside out. They could split a theological hair into sixteen equal divisions, yet even a high-powered microscope would be unable to find love for God and others in most of their hearts.”

Here is the bottom line: Prophecy without love, knowledge without love, and faith without love all amount to zero. Love is not a garnish to the Christian life - it is the essential ingredient. Without love, the greatest gifts, deepest insights, and strongest faith are nothing.

Love surpasses language. Love surpasses learning. Third:

III. Love Surpasses Labor

Verse 3...

Agapē love is always self-sacrificing, but self-sacrifice does not necessarily come from love.

Notice sacrificial labor #1 - Give all possessions to help the poor. The word “possessions” refers to everything at one’s disposal, including possessions, property and resources. But, as Richard Lenski said, if this action of the hands were not a true action of the heart, it would profit nothing in the sight of God.

Then in verse 3 there is sacrificial labor #2 - Give your life in martyrdom. The word “profits” in verse 3 carries with it the idea of something God views as useful, beneficial and valuable. One might ask how it would be possible to do these things such as give all your possessions to the poor and to give your life in martyrdom and not be commended by God. How could a member of a church give everything away to the poor or allow himself to be martyred for the cause of Christianity and have it mean nothing to God? The answer again is the motive of the heart.

When a person makes a sacrifice, other people look at the act; but God looks at the heart, the motive and the level of love. If a person were doing these things and making these sacrifices out of a love for God and others, these two sacrifices would bring glory to God and eternal honor. However, if a person were doing these things for self-gain or self-glory, even if these extreme types of acts were done, it would profit nothing in eternity.

Do you see what Paul has done in our text today? He has described what we would think is the perfect Christian. He has described the bionic believer. This hypothetical Christian does it all and he does it all perfectly.

He would make the perfect missionary because he knows all languages. He speaks the words of God because he has the gift of prophecy. He knows all mysteries and he has all knowledge. He has so much faith that all traffic lights turn green in answer to his prayers. He gives all of his possessions. He ends his Christian service in martyrdom.

He only has one fault. He has a lack of love. Paul shows that all of these other things this man has going for him count for nothing. Such a man produces nothing of value for God.

After many resumes, interviews, and candidate a church brought on a new preaching pastor. The people complained because every week he told people they were sinners and if they did not repent, they would end up in hell. The pastor didn't last long.

A new pastor was hired and the people loved him. When asked what the new pastor preached, a member of the congregation answered, "He tells us that we are sinners and headed for hell unless we repent."

When asked why they liked the second pastor when he was saying the same thing as the first pastor, the answer was insightful. "When the first pastor told us we were headed for hell it seemed like he was happy about it. But when the new pastor says it we can tell that it breaks his heart."

The main evidence of maturity in the Christian life is a growing love for God and for God's people, as well as a love for lost souls. It has well been said that love is the "circulatory system" of the body of Christ.

If we have no love, we have nothing; but if we have love, though we may lack much else, then we have what matters most.

If we make it our goal to love each other with the love that comes only from Jesus, then we will always use our spiritual gifts toward each other in a way that pleases Him.

Paul reminds us that without love, even the greatest gifts and sacrifices are nothing. So the question is not, "What am I doing for God?" but rather, "Am I doing it in love?"

This week, let's take Paul's challenge personally:

Before you speak, ask "Am I speaking in love?"

Before you serve, ask "Am I serving in love?"

Before you give, ask "Am I giving in love?"

We have seen the incredible supremacy of love. Love surpasses language, learning, and labor. May agape love be the measure of your ministry and the motivation of your life.

Let's pray...